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Confederate cruiser died a long way from her element

By JEFFERSON WEAVER Staff Writer

One of the most effective warships that ever flew the Confederate flag died an ignominious death, a long way from the Atlantic Ocean where her crew wreaked havoc.

The CSS Chickamauga, whose crew fought at Fort Fisher, captured more than a dozen merchant ships, caused a financial crisis in New York's shipping agencies, and terrorized ports from Bangor, Maine, to Philadelphia sank in the muddy, flood-swollen waters of the Cape Fear River at a place called Indian Wells, sixty miles from the nearest salt water.

Last days of the Confederacy

Commander John Wilkinson knew the end was near, even before word of the defeat at Fort Fisher reached the Navy offices in downtown Wilmington.

Fisher, the "Gibraltar of The South," as it was called, had protected the port of Wilmington since 1861. Ships carrying weapons, equipment, food, clothing and other goods from England, Nassau and Bermuda slipped under the guns of Fort Fisher past the largest U.S. naval fleet assembled until World War II. From Wilmington the goods were sent throughout the Confederacy.

By 1864, the war was becoming unacceptably expensive-not just in lives, but in tax dollars. President Abraham Lincoln was under pressure to finish the rebellion, while Confederate President Jefferson Davis was under equal pressure to find new strategies to help the South win its freedom.

Naval strategists in the Confederate government had pushed the idea of commerce raiders since the beginning of the war. With a small, comparatively weak navy, the Confederacy needed to use what resources it had in the most efficient manner. Rather than taking on the U.S. Navy ships-which didn't work well for either side-Confederate strategists wanted to cripple the Union Navy, and thereby the Union government, by hitting them in the wallet.

By striking the unarmed merchant ships of Yankee businesses, cruisers could help drive insurance rates and the cost of goods sky high, making the powerful businessmen of the North push those in Washington for some kind of negotiated peace. The practice almost worked.

The Chickamauga and ships like her cost Northern businessmen the modern equivalent of billions of dollars in lost cargos, ships and insurance settlements. On a side note, the CSS Shenandoah, which targeted U.S.-owned whaling ships, caused such damage to the whaling industry that federal dollars were used to increase and expedite the production of coal oil for lamps and other purposes, laying the groundwork for the modern petroleum industry.

Captured ships and goods were sold at prize auctions in friendly ports, with a portion going to the crew and the captain. As such, cruisers rarely had the recruiting problems suffered by other C.S. Navy ships. They were often manned with aggressive, skilled seamen, many of whom saw America for the first time when their ships came to port here.

But by the late winter of 1864, the South was being worn down. Wilmington was the last port open to the vital blockade runners, and the Federal blockade was closing in tight. More ships were added to the blockading fleet, and in January 1865, a second Union attack against Fort Fisher resulted in the loss of the fort.

Throughout the war, Gen. W.H.C. Whiting and Col. William Lamb set out to make Fort Fisher stronger. When the Federal fleet increased drastically prior to the first invasion, Lamb warned that he needed more skilled artillerymen, to man a battery composed of heavy naval cannon at the south end of Fisher. A number of the Chickamauga's men volunteered.

The Chickamauga had made port just before the first invasion, and her guns were used to some effect against the invaders. Armed with long-range cannon, the ship stood in the Cape Fear River behind Fort Fisher. Using the island for cover, the Chickamauga was able to add her long-range cannon to the artillery of the fort and repel the invasion.

The ship was stuck in port due to the increasing blockade, and a shortage of quality coal for the boilers. Capt. John Taylor Wood, a nephew of President Davis and one of the most daring C.S. Naval officers, hoped to use the Chickamauga in an invasion of the Delmarva peninsula, but the plans fell through when word got out through Federal spies.

After successfully betting off the first invasion, Fort Fisher found itself under siege again less than three weeks later. This time, the Federal invaders were successful.

Some of the Chickamauga's crew was still on duty at Fort Fisher, and were captured or killed in the fighting. With Fort

Fisher out of the way, federal forces began cautiously moving their way up the Cape Fear toward Wilmington. Spies had overestimated the abilities of the state-built ironclads, the North Carolina and the Raleigh, and had somehow failed to report that the two ironclads were sunk at their moorings, their weapons captured when Fort Fisher fell.

In late February, as Confederate troops evacuated Fort Anderson on the west bank, others on the east bank fought a delaying action near modern-day Monkey Junction, south of Wilmington.

In Wilmington, panic set in.

"True bedlam"

A Wilmington resident who lived through the evacuation in 1865 called it "True bedlam."

Drunken sailors from C.S. Naval ships and blockade runners roistered in the streets. Looting became rampant, and soldiers from the Cape Fear district couldn't begin to keep order.

An organized withdrawal was out of the question, and C.S. Lt. Stanford Gregory said he went about the streets "armed, looking for a way out." The Turkey-area native somehow missed Wilkinson's company being assembled near the Chickamauga, although he did mention in his journal one group of "professional" looking "bluejackets."

With the Cape Fear River full of Federal gunboats as well as obstructions and explosive mines, Wilkinson knew the Chickamauga couldn't make it to sea. The only hope of saving the vessel was to withdraw upstream as far as possible and wait for the right moment to dash downriver.

Even that was a desperate hope, as the Cape Fear's channel was usually three to six feet below the minimum draft needed for an oceangoing ship like the Chickamauga. Just a few miles upstream, the Cape Fear also became too narrow for ships over 100 feet to easily make a turn.

But for once, the Cape Fear was cooperating.

The river was flooding, the first part of a major spring flood that became known as Sherman's Fresh, since the freshet or flood peaked when Gen. William Sherman's Federal Troops reached the Cape Fear at Fayetteville. This flood has been estimated to be the equivalent of the 1945 floods that caused the Cape Fear to spread for miles past its banks.

There was a chance, however slight, that the Chickamauga could make it upstream. If the ship could be safely hidden somewhere, Wilkinson probably hoped to make a dash for the ocean after the Federal riverboats cleared the mines and obstructions of the port.

The Chickamauga slipped from her berth amongst idle blockade runners and overloaded riverboats on the evening of Feb. 20. She turned her bow upstream and began what would become a torturous trip upstream.

It is not known how many sailors the Chickamauga carried upstream; some of her crew at the time was undoubtedly composed of unemployed sailors from the Wilmington port, as well as what rivermen could be convinced to help get the big boat upstream.

If a local river pilot was available, Wilkinson probably would have hired him as well, since the Cape Fear's sandbars, twists and turns were infamous even when the water was low and a captain had a ship designed for the brown water.

For a ship considered one of the fastest ever to slide out of the shipyards in Scotland, and a bluewater crew used to open water, the trip up the Cape Fear must have been a nightmare. Trees six feet or more thick had been uprooted by the floodwaters, and swept downstream. The channel was invisible, since many of the landmarks would have been underwater, and at least some of the trip was made in the dark.

As several of the turns required to navigate the river were sharp and narrow-like the colorfully named "Pull and Be Damned" Point, and the "Devil's Elbow"-sailors had to use winches, blocks, tackles and ropes to manually pull the big ship through some places. Her recently rebuilt gears and steam engines were built for open ocean speed, not the up-and-down, stop-and-go traveling of a flood-swollen river. Just as a sports car can't move through deep sand like a four-wheel-drive truck, the Chickamauga's powerful engines were useless in some places.

Forty miles upstream from Wilmington, and nearly 80 from the Atlantic, One or two days out of Wilmington, she was stuck. The ship grounded on a submerged bank near the place called Indian Wells. While she wasn't crippled, there was no way the ship could make it back downstream under her own power. It's likely her gearing was badly damaged, or Wilkinson knew there was no way he could safely turn her bow downstream for a last-ditch run through Wilmington's port.

It would be the end of the southern cruisers.

Final shots for the Chickamauga

Harry Woods and his wife have lived near East Arcadia for years. A retired farmer and millworker, he'd heard stories of a Confederate ship sunk near his home, less than a mile from the Cape Fear River.

"I'm interested in old things," he said, "but I wasn't sure how to find out about it."

A friend mentioned that the Chickamauga had been scuttled at Indian Wells, a set of springs draining into the Cape Fear.

Indians camped there for centuries before white settlers came to Bladen, and descendants of the Cape Fears still live in the area.

The Wells, as it is sometimes called, is located on part of property his wife's family has owned for generations. He said he was always curious about some odd mounds he saw near the river.

"I wondered if that's where they (the Confederates) had put their cannons," he said.

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After receiving a metal detector for Christmas, Woods immediately started exploring the old mounds. He found a handful of bullets-58 and .56 caliber lead slugs-near one of the mounds. <br />

Woods is...